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ABSTRACT

A treatment program was instituted to reduce dating anxiety in infrequent daters. A sample of 85 extremely anxious and inhibited college undergraduates of both sexes volunteered for the program. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of three practice dating groups and two control groups. In one practice dating group, each non-dater was paired with a different, randomly assigned non-dater each week for six practice dates of their own choosing. In the other two practice dating groups, non-daters were paired with high frequency daters for their six practice dates. In one of these groups, both partners were informed of their partner's dating frequency, whereas in the other they were not. Group discussion and delayed treatment control groups were included. Outcome was assessed by self-report, self-monitoring, behavioral, and peer rating measures. On most outcome measures, all groups exhibited significant anxiety decreases and skill as dating frequency increases. However, contrary to the initial hypotheses, the practice dating groups were not found to be superior to the control groups on any of the assessment measures and no differential outcome was found among the three practice dating groups. Variables that might have accounted for these results were explored. (Author)

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Partner Characteristics and the Effectiveness of Practice Dating Procedures in the Treatment of Minimal Dating[1]

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[1]This paper was presented at the meetings of the Association for the Advancement of Behaviour Therapy, Atlanta, 1977. It is based on a Master's Thesis by Perl and a Doctoral Dissertation by Hinton. Further details of the study are available in the thesis and dissertation.

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Partner Characteristics and the Effectiveness of Practice Dating Procedures in the Treatment of Minimal Dating

Several recent studies have pointed to the effectiveness of practice dating for the treatment of minimal dating problems (Christensen & Arkowitz, 1974; Christensen, Arkowitz, & Anderson, 1975; Kramer, 1975; Thomander, 1975). In addition, a real life practice procedure similar to practice dating has been shown to be effective in the treatment of anxiety and isolation regarding same sex friendships (Royce & Arkowitz, 1978). The present experiment constitutes an extension of the practice dating procedure to much more severely inhibited subjects than had been used in the previous studies. In addition, the present experiment was designed to examine some parameters which might influence the effectiveness of practice dating.

The practice dating procedure basically consists of a series of weekly practice dates, each with a different partner. Both dating partners are volunteers for the treatment program which is aimed at increasing dating comfort and frequency. The overall procedure consists of an initial orientation meeting to explain the details of the program. In addition, subjects undergo assessment before and after treatment and at follow-up. The only intervening treatment consists of a series of practice dates with an opposite-sexed volunteer for the program. In most of the studies, the subjects typically have six such practice dates, each with a different partner. After the pre-treatment assessment the subjects are sent the name and telephone number of a different partner each week. Their only instruction is that a meeting should occur with the partner before the end of that week. All details of the date - including where to go, how

long the date should be, what to talk about, etc. - are left entirely to the subjects. Even the decision concerning who makes the call to arrange the date is left entirely to the subjects. Each week the procedure is repeated with a different dating partner. Except for the orientation meeting and the assessments, there is no other contact between the subjects and any therapists or experimental personnel.

The procedure bears some obvious similarities to a computer dating service. However, there are several important differences between our procedure and such services. The goal of the practice dating procedure is stated to the subjects as dating practice rather than helping them find some ideal partner. Related to this point, the matches are almost entirely random in the practice dating procedure with a few rare exceptions. This is in contrast to computer dating services whose stated goals are to find some ideal partner for the participant through a detailed matching of characteristics of the participants.

In the practice dating studies cited above, practice dating has led to significant reductions in anxiety and increases in dating frequency for the participants. These changes have maintained over 1½ year follow-up period. The increases in dating shown by the participants reflect dating with <u>new</u> partners whom the subjects found on their own rather than a continuation of dating with partners whom they met through the program. Thus the practice dating program fails as a computer dating service, but succeeds in effecting significant behavior change in both anxiety and dating frequency.

One problem with the practice dating studies, as well as with most treatment studies of minimal dating, (cf. Arkowitz, 1977; Curran, 1977)

is that the subjects are not very "minimal" in their dating. For example, subjects in the Christensen, Arkowitz and Anderson (1975) study were averaging one date per month prior to treatment. Subjects for the present study were quite severely inhibited and anxious. In this respect they more closely resembled a clinical population. Because of this, the present study may be considered to be a more stringent test of the effectiveness of the practice dating procedure.

In addition to evaluating the effectiveness of practice dating with a more inhibited sample, a second purpose of the study was to evaluate the effects of certain parametric variations on the effectiveness of practice dating. The overall design consisted of two control groups and three treatment groups. One control group was a waiting list control group. A second control group received a treatment based on group discussion. The first of the three practice dating conditions was essentially a replication of the earlier procedure. Low dating men were paired with low dating women for the series of practice dates (Low-Low group). In the remaining two practice dating groups, low dating subjects were paired with high dating subjects for the practice dates. The high dating subjects were also volunteers for the program. In one condition, the low dating subjects were informed that their dating partners were quite active and comfortable in dating (Low-High-Informed). In the second condition, the low dating subjects were uninformed as to the high dating characteristics of their partners (Low-High-Uninformed). Apart from the characteristics of the dating partners and whether or not the subjects were informed about the characteristics of their dating partners, the procedures followed in the three practice dating groups were

essentially similar.

We predicted that all three practice dating groups would show significantly greater improvement than the control groups. In addition, we predicted the order of improvement for the three practice dating groups to be as follows: Low-High greater than Low-Low greater than Low-High-Informed.

The rationale for the prediction that the Low-High group would improve to a greater extent than the Low-Low group was based on certain assumptions concerning differential partner behaviors. We assumed that the high dating partners would do more prompting, modeling, and reinforcing appropriate dating behavior in their partners than would low dating partners. Therefore, low frequency daters whose partners date frequently should benefit from their more experienced partners. High frequency daters are also more likely to be more physically attractive, less socially anxious, and more socially skilled than low frequency daters (Glasgow & Arkowitz, 1975). If the low frequency daters in the Low-High group perceive the desirability and attractiveness of their partners, and if the dates go reasonably well, the resultant effect should be a decrease in social anxiety and increase in self-esteem for the subjects in this treatment group.

But what about the Low-High-Informed group? This group should have all the positive features of the Low-High group working in its favor. However, there is one factor which we think is present in the Low-High-Informed group which would diminish some of its effectiveness. This relates to a degree of performance anxiety which we believe will be induced in the low frequency daters in this group through informing them that

they will be dating active and comfortable partners. Some suggestive data from past research (e.g., Christensen, Arkowitz, & Anderson, 1975) has led us to believe that the effectiveness of the practice dating procedure is due primarily to anxiety reduction. We see it as a form of in vivo desensitization. The low likelihood of rejection and the exposure to the real-life dating situation seem to be the active elements in the procedure. To the extent that the low daters know that their partners will be high daters, it seems that some performance anxiety will be generated which may interfere with the effectiveness of the procedures. Thus we predict that the Low-High-Informed group will do the least well of the three practice dating groups. However, we also predict that the three practice dating groups will all be superior to the two control groups.

METHOD

Subjects. A total of 3800 Social Activity Questionnaires (SAQ) were administered to undergraduates at the University of Arizona. This brief questionnaire inquired about dating frequency, comfort, and desire to participate in a dating treatment program. Approximately half of the subjects indicated an interest in participating in the dating treatment program. From the subsample, the lowest frequency dating subjects and the most anxious subjects were selected to be invited to participate in the study. A total of 85 low dating men and women were included in the study. These subjects averaged 2.07 dates in the last six months and .45 dates in the past month.

The high frequency daters were also selected from this subgroup. The high frequency dating subjects averaged slightly over 46 dates in

the past six months and over 10 dates in the last month. They had also indicated an interest in participating in a dating program.

Assessment. All of the assessment instruments were administered before treatment, immediately after treatment, and at follow-up unless otherwise indicated. Subjects were given two self-report questionnaires in addition to the Social Activity Qeustionnaire. The first was the Social Avoidance and Distress (SAD) Scale of Watson and Friend (1969). The second self-report measure was the Survey of Heterosexual Interactions - the SHI (Twentyman & McFall, 1975). This latter measure is appropriate only for male subjects. Subjects were also asked to record their date and casual interactions during the one-week pre, post and follow-up assessment periods in a diary of heterosexual interactions. This self-monitoring measure enabled us to get an estimate of the frequency and range of both date and casual heterosexual interactions.

A behavioral assessment procedure was administered before treatment, after treatment, and at follow-up. This consisted of a ten-minute live conversation with an opposite-sex subject. The partners in the interaction rated one another and themselves on social anxiety and social skill on seven-point rating scales. In addition, talk time of each participant was measured.

Peer rating measures were also employed. These consisted of a questionnaire which we sent to friends and acquaintances of the subjects with the subjects' permission. Because it seemed likely that a substantial lag would exist between changes in subjects' behavior and peers' perceptions of these changes, post-treatment administration of this measure was omitted. The peer rating inventory was sent to peers at

pre-treatment and once again at follow-up. The peers' ratings of subjects' frequency, skill and anxiety in opposite-sex social interactions, as well as estimates of social activity were obtained from this measure.

TREATMENT

The three practice dating procedures have been described earlier. Subjects in the waiting list control group were told that the program was full and that we were unable to accept them at this time. They were contacted again at the end of the six-week period and offered practice dating treatment. The group discussion control group received a series of six 90 minute group sessions led by a clinical psychology graduate student. There were three group leaders, each of whom led a different discussion group that included three male low daters and three female low daters. Each of the group leaders had previous individual and group therapy experience. The focus of these groups was on specific concerns related to dating. The emphasis was on group discussion. Any use of modeling, behavior rehearsal, or other skill training techniques was prohibited. After the final group meeting subjects in this condition were offered the practice dating treatment if they wished.

RESULTS

Since the primary focus of the present study was on the treatment of minimal dating, only the results for the low frequency dating subjects will be reported. Out of the 85 subjects who completed pre-treatment assessment, only six (7.06%) failed to complete the post-treatment assessment. There were two drop-outs from the Low-High-Informed group and one from each of the other four experimental groups.

Subjects in the three practice dating groups were sent the names of

six different dating partners over the six week period. The Low-Low group members completed an average of 3.94 dates; Low-High group members completed an average of 4.73 dates; and Low-High-Informed subjects completed an average of 3.31 dates. Subjects claimed an inability to contact their partners or difficulty in arranging mutually convenient times as reasons for the failure to complete their assigned dates.

One-way analyses of variance on all measures revealed no significant differences among the groups at the pre-treatment assessment. Two-way analyses (sex of subject x treatment group) of pre-treatment to post-treatment change scores showed no significant sex or sex x treatment group interaction effects. Therefore sexes were combined within each group for all further analyses.

Repeated measures analyses of variance (with pre-post or post-follow-up scores serving as the repeated measures variable) were conducted for all outcome and follow-up analyses except those involving dating frequency and self-monitoring measures. These latter two sets of measures were treated non-parametrically according to recommendations by Curran and Gilbert (1975). The Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed-Ranks Test was utilized to analyze changes in self-reported dating frequency and range measures and in the self-monitoring measures.

On most measures and in most analyses the results were very consistent. All groups (including the two control groups) showed significant improvement from pre-test to post-test. There were no differences among groups in the amount of improvement. Significant improvements were demonstrated on dating frequency and range, the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale, the Survey of Heterosexual Interactions, self- and partner

ratings of anxiety, and the peer rating measures. There were no significant improvements on any of the self-monitoring measures. Finally, there were no significant improvements on self-rated and partner-rated social skill and talk time during the live interaction.

On no measure was there a significant difference between any of the practice dating groups and any of the control groups. In addition, there was no evidence for any significant differences among the practice dating groups in terms of outcome. The means of selected outcome measures for the three combined practice dating groups and the two control groups at pre-treatment, post-treatment, and follow-up are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Because some subjects in both of the control groups participated in the practice dating program following post-treatment assessment, only the three practice dating groups were included in the follow-up assessment. All practice dating subjects completed the follow-up assessment (three months follow-up) with the exception of two subjects in the Low-Low group and one subject in the Low-High group. This represents an overall post-treatment to follow-up attrition rate of 6.8%.

Only two of the post-treatment to follow-up analyses were significant. Wilcoxon tests revealed that the Low-Low and Low-High groups continued to increase their dating frequency from post-treatment to follow-up. This suggests that the improvements shown by the practice dating groups were maintained at the three month follow-up.

Due to the surprising lack of differences between the practice dating groups and the control groups a search was made for factors that

might have accounted for these findings. Although subjects were randomly assigned among the five groups, we noticed that there nonetheless appeared to be some non-random distribution on two variables. One variable related to freshman versus non-freshman status, and a second variable related to the lifetime dating history of the subjects. In both cases, the non-random distribution would likely favor improvements in the discussion and delayed treatment control group. For example, there was a disproportionate number of freshmen in the two control groups compared to the practice dating groups. Freshmen, who are starting school in a new environment, seem most likely to begin dating spontaneously after an initial period of low dating frequency. We felt that this non-random factor might have accounted for the unusual gains made by the control groups. While additional analyses did indicate that freshmen showed the greatest improvements on some measures, this factor did not account for the overall patterns of results reported earlier.

A second factor that we considered related to the lifetime dating history of the subjects. For selection, we inquired about dating frequency over the prior six month period. In addition we also asked subjects to estimate the number of dates which they have had during their lives. Of the 81 subjects who answered this question, 73 had 50 or fewer dates in their lifetime and eight had 85 or more dates in their lifetime. Five of these eight high lifetime daters were in the delayed treatment control group while the other three were each in different groups. The distribution of these high lifetime daters was clearly disproportionate. We thought that the high lifetime daters might be in a temporary situational state of low dating which could be altered quite

radically with changed circumstances. Nonetheless, examination of the outcome results with these eight subjects removed from the subject pool did not show a very different pattern of results than when they were included. While the high lifetime daters did tend to show greater improvements than the low lifetime daters, eliminating them from the subject pool did not make any substantial difference in the main analyses.

DISCUSSION

The results demonstrated large and significant pre-treatment to post-treatment changes for all groups including the three practice dating groups and the two control groups. There were no differences in the amount of improvement shown by the practice groups vs. the control groups. Finally, there were no differences among the three practice dating groups in the amount of improvement.

The finding that the practice dating procedures led to no more change than the control procedures was quite surprising. All groups showed large and significant improvements on most measures. The finding that the practice dating groups showed such significant improvements is consistent with past research. The surprising findings relate to the large and significant improvements shown by both control groups. In other studies of minimal dating (see reviews by Arkowitz, 1977; Curran, 1977), such control groups have not typically shown any significant improvement. Because the practice dating groups were not superior to the control groups, we cannot conclude that the practice procedure added anything beyond the common factors present in all five groups. These common factors included expectancies of change, the passage of time, and the reactive effects of testing. However, the fact that similar control

groups have not shown such changes in other studies, and the disproportionate number of freshman and high lifetime daters in our control groups suggest that our control groups may contain some artifacts that we have not detected. Even though the pattern of results was not radically altered when we partialled out these factors, the presence of these two factors suggest that a third superordinate factor might be present in the control groups resulting from unintentional non-random assignment on that factor. However, this remains quite speculative since we cannot locate such a factor. If neither the control nor the practice dating groups had shown significant changes, we would have concluded that practice dating is ineffective with this more inhibited population. However, because of the intrepretive difficulties discussed above, we believe that a replication of the present study is needed. This need be only a partial replication comparing the Low-Low practice dating procedure with the two control procedures. Such a partial replication is clearly needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn.

While our conclusions about the differences between the practice dating groups and the control groups remain unclear, our conclusions about the differences among the three practice dating groups are quite clear. On none of the comparisons were there any differences between the three variations of practice dating employed. Using high dating frequency partners and informing subjects of the dating status of their partners did not either enhance or diminish the effectiveness of the basic practice dating procedure. Because of this and because the basic practice dating procedure (pairing low daters with other low daters) is the most economical procedure, we recommend that further studies of

practice dating focus on the basic procedure involving dates in which both partners are low daters.

Table 1

Means of Selected Outcome Measures: Pretreatment, Posttreatment, and at the Three Month Follow-Up

Measures	Groups		
	Combined Means For the 3 Practice Dating Groups	Group Discussion Control	Delayed Treatment Control
Self-Report			
Dating Frequency, 1 Month (SAQ)			
Pretreatment	0.44	0.50	0.47
Posttreatment	1.97	1.71	6.22
Follow-Up	3.81		
SAD[a]			
Pretreatment	12.62	14.30	13.15
Posttreatment	8.17	9.70	8.90
Follow-Up	6.35		
SHI[b] (Males Only)			
Pretreatment	66.76	59.70	70.33
Posttreatment	84.80	78.20	72.77
Follow-Up	85.23		
Self-Monitoring			
Frequency of Interactions with the Opposite Sex in 1 week (Diary of Social Interactions)			
Pretreatment	19.20	12.44	19.44
Posttreatment	19.83	14.60	25.08
Follow-Up	23.01		

Table 1 (Continued)

Means of Selected Outcome Measures: Pretreatment, Posttreatment, and at the Three Month Follow-Up

Measures	Groups		
	Combined Means For the 3 Practice Dating Groups	Group Discussion Control	Delayed Treatment Control
Behavioral Assessment			
Partner-Rated Social Skill[c]			
Pretreatment	5.13	5.00	5.16
Posttreatment	5.40	5.18	5.70
Follow-Up	5.15		
Partner-Rated Social Anxiety[a]			
Pretreatment	3.31	3.11	2.89
Posttreatment	2.46	2.43	2.41
Follow-Up	2.53		

[a] For anxiety measures, the lower the score, the lower the reported anxiety.

[b] For the SHI, the higher the score, the lower the reported level of inhibition in social situations.

[c] For ratings of social skill, the higher the score, the higher the level of reported social skill.

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